

STATEMENT OF  
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before the  
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION  
September 14, 2000  
concerning  
AIRLINE DELAYS

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to address an issue of critical importance to American travelers, the airline industry, Congress, and the Administration--unacceptable airline delays and cancellations and the customer service problems they cause. Accompanying me today is FAA Administrator Jane Garvey.

At the Department of Transportation, our effort to improve customer service ranks second only to safety, which is President Clinton and Vice President Gore's highest transportation priority. Dealing with the mounting airline delays and cancellations we have experienced over the past few years, and especially during the heavy travel months this summer, is an issue of paramount importance for the Department. We are charged with consumer protection in the airline industry, and the FAA is charged with operation of the air traffic control system nationwide--24 hours a day every day of the year.

At the dawn of this new millennium--we together--industry and government--must build on the tremendous economic success that we have created together as we implement our flight plan for aviation's second century. We face three broad challenges--the challenge of globalization beyond Open Skies; the challenge of enhancing access and competition in the aviation marketplace; and the challenge of improving system efficiency and capacity.

When President Clinton and Vice President Gore took office in 1993, U.S. airlines had collectively lost \$10 billion dollars over the prior three years. Eastern and Pan Am were already out of business and others were close to bankruptcy. The aviation industry was on the verge of slipping into an economic abyss.

This Administration took immediate action. From Day One we understood the critical role aviation plays in a healthy economy. That is why President Clinton traveled to Washington State to meet with airline industry and labor leaders almost immediately after taking office. And that is why the President and Vice President Gore advocated the creation and purposes of the Baliles "Commission to Ensure a Strong Competitive Airline Industry" in 1993, the White House

Commission on Aviation Safety and Security in 1996, and the Mineta "National Civil Aviation Review Commission" in 1997.

The 1993 plan launched by labor and the industry with the President at Everett, Washington worked, and the successes are many. The safety record steadily improves. Carriers are experiencing record-level passenger demand and revenue growth. We have focused on opening new markets abroad and on opening access to more and more travelers across this nation. Aviation is back on its feet, with six consecutive years of growth.

In fact, the issues we face today are the result of growth and success, rather than economic failure. And I believe that this Administration and the Congress already have the basic elements in place to successfully deal with the strains growth has produced. The paramount task now is to ensure better service along with safety, and to continue the long-term viability and growth of this vital sector of the economy.

On our part, the FAA and the Department's strategy has been to focus on strategic issues--modernization of the air traffic control system in incremental fashion and on infrastructure growth, especially new runways at the largest airports. We have also focused on more efficient operations --"Free Flight" Phases One and Two, for example--implementing new procedures and decision-support tools that produce measurable benefits, such as reduced fuel consumption and increased aircraft operations at some airports. We met the Y2K challenge, we have implemented our Spring/Summer 2000 Plan, and we worked in concert with Congress to enact the most comprehensive and significant aviation bill in recent memory. Let me take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Hollings, Subcommittee Chairman Gorton, and Ranking Member Rockefeller, along with the committee membership and the entire Congress for the new tools you provided us in AIR-21. Together we have forged a remarkable bipartisan consensus in the Congress to support the necessary costs of upgrading the air traffic control system. However, our FY 2001 Operations levels needs your support. When the President signed AIR-21, he stressed the need to work to correct the imbalance between capital and operations levels, and I seek your support in the imminent conference on DOT appropriations to support funding FAA Operations at the President's requested level.

We continue to be focused on better treatment of passengers when delays or cancellations do interfere with flight plans. We sent a comprehensive bill to Congress in March 1999 that was crafted to collect and deliver accurate information about flight delays to the passenger, relying on a "market driven" approach to allow the consumer a knowledgeable choice. The Inspector General and my staff are now engaged in evaluating the success of the Voluntary Plans the airlines have undertaken to address the problems themselves. I would emphasize here that it was your leadership, Mr. Chairman, that forged this concerted effort and commitment by the airlines on behalf of airline travelers.

Information is available to assist consumers in choosing flights that are more likely to operate on time. Each airline reservation agent and travel agent uses computer reservations systems that contain on-time performance information on a flight-by-flight basis. Upon request, this information must be provided to consumers. Our challenge is to make the availability of that information better known, because it really can help, yet few travelers currently request it.

Working together, I believe, remains the key to solving the issue of excessive delays and flight cancellations we are here to discuss today. Our experience to date convinces me it is the best approach. But it is incumbent on the industry, airlines and airports, to take up the challenge as well. This means putting the passenger first. We have seen evidence of airlines realigning their schedules at airports with heavy delays, and cutting back their overall scheduling to ensure the availability of adequate numbers of backup aircraft and crews. These are good first steps, and I am confident others will be taken as well. In this context, I commend American Airlines' CEO Donald Carty for his straightforward acknowledgment Tuesday that "The accusation that airlines overschedule is absolutely true."

The factors that cause delays and cancellations are many and complex. They include "predictable unpredictables" -- the unsettled weather we have experienced this summer, inoperable runways, and aircraft equipment problems, for example-- as well as the knottier issues of handling massed arrivals and departures at major hub airports.

Let us acknowledge first that the responsibility for action is shared by the government, the airlines, and the airports, and that we at DOT have a large role to play in addressing the institutional and operational aspects of air traffic control. As we have met at airports across this nation on these problems, we have not been finger-pointing but have worked collaboratively. At DOT, we must focus on and deal with the many air traffic management issues we and others have identified as central to a solution, and we must address the infrastructure of the system--most significantly airport capacity and air navigation equipment.

President Clinton announced on March 10 the creation of our Spring/Summer 2000 plan. At the heart of this initiative is a collaborative plan developed by the industry, labor, and Government to better manage air traffic during severe weather. It maximizes the use of available air space, improves communications between FAA and aviation system users, and expands the use of new technology to help reduce delays. Our view is that this summer's experience would have been noticeably worse without benefit of this high-level collaboration effort.

Each day at 5:00 AM Eastern Time a conference call is conducted to discuss potential weather problems in the air traffic control system. The FAA facilitates the discussion, which is joined by airline meteorologists and National Weather Service meteorologists. An FAA planning specialist monitors the conference call

Also in the enroute environment, regional jets, which operate more slowly than the new fleet of commercial aircraft, create a mix of speeds at altitude that will get more complex as the number of regional jets increase.

A further factor that complicates air traffic control, is that of airline scheduling and airport capacity. At the risk of stating the obvious, air traffic is a dynamic situation. Every procedural enhancement, every step forward in modernization, every improvement in efficiency, cannot be measured in a static environment, but must be evaluated in light of daily changes in weather, runway availability, and airline schedules. Consequently, the installation of an Instrument Landing System (ILS), enhanced radar, or a reduction of miles in trail requirements may not necessarily translate into a reduction of airline delays, even if efficiencies are achieved. The FAA clearly has an important role to play in the reduction of airline delays, but this responsibility is shared with airlines and airports. True progress can only be realized when all three players accept their roles and work in cooperation with each other.

As the Members of this Committee know, the issue of airport capacity is very sensitive. Whether local communities are discussing new runways, new terminals, or new airports, the debate is always heartfelt and emotional. While FAA will continue to make those improvements in the NAS that are within our control, improving how aircraft are controlled in the air does not necessarily ensure them a speedy descent to the runway. Hard choices will have to be made at all levels of government across the country to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place to accommodate anticipated demand, such as the recent initiative to encourage lower altitude flying.

Notwithstanding the airport capacity issue, FAA's longer-term role, and one in which we are currently engaged, is enhancing the system for a new era. The FAA is working with Mitre and a broad cross section of the aviation industry to develop a viable, comprehensive plan for system operation into the future. The plan will represent both a technical and operational approach to the future of air traffic control and will incorporate many of FAA's ongoing initiatives such as Free Flight Phases 1 and 2, and airspace redesign. Our goal is to establish comprehensive processes and procedures to ensure adaptable and flexible airspace that meet the demands of the future NAS. Equally important are the procedural changes we are making on a continual basis as the opportunities arise, such as the choke point initiatives.

Another important aspect in our effort to improve the management of the air traffic control system is modernization. As the Members of this Committee know, we are well into a successful modernization plan. Taken as a whole, modernization will improve the controllers' ability to manage increasing levels

of traffic. Decision support tools are being developed to facilitate more efficient routings and shorten airborne time. The reliability of the system is also being increased, thereby increasing confidence in the system. We continue to develop technologies and equipment that will result in safe reductions in aircraft separation.

Major efforts are also underway in my office to address the problems systematically. I have asked Associate Deputy Secretary Stephen Van Beek to head up a task force on airline service quality performance that will draw on many areas of the Department to produce an action plan over the next few months. This was prompted in part by the recent report to Congress of U.S. DOT Inspector General Ken Mead, who is also testifying today, setting forth the extent of the problem and the need to act. Additionally, section 227 of the Wendell H. Ford Aviation Investment and Reform Act for the 21st Century (AIR-21), signed April 5, 2000, called for a task force to improve reporting of delays. The task force will coordinate action by the FAA, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, our aviation office, and the consumer protection office, with participation by the Air Transport Association, consumer organizations, and others with a stake in our air transportation system. The task force will focus on two areas--determining the nature and causes of delays, and how to best report delay/cancellation information to the public.

Our Inspector General also provided a valuable interim report in June on the airlines' success in implementing their "Voluntary Plans" for improved customer service across a range of issues--including timely and accurate consumer notification of delays and cancellations. While we await the final report, I would stress that the IG recommends increased enforcement resources in our airline consumer protection office, a request that we have pending in our appropriations bill as we speak. I respectfully request your support for a favorable conference outcome that is consistent with our budget request and the increased funding authorized for these activities in AIR-21.

I have also asked Assistant Secretary Francisco Sanchez, to put together a report on the current "best practices" of the airlines and airports in providing high-quality customer service and providing information to air travelers. Those "best practices" are being compiled now. The report will be released in early October for the benefit of the industry and the consumers they serve.

We have taken other actions as well to address the causes of delays and cancellations. During August, I encouraged the pilots and management of United Airlines to press for agreement at the bargaining table over pending contract issues, to put United, the largest airline in the world, back on the path to providing the quality of service both United and the American people expect. As

this agreement is implemented, it should go a long way to relieving the frustrations experienced at airports served by the United network and workforce.

I have also recently met with the major stakeholders in the aviation industry--including representatives of airlines, consumer organizations, labor unions, airports, trade associations, travel agencies, consultants, and state and local governments, to discuss the current challenges facing the industry. Two of these meetings took place in Washington, but I also traveled to Newark, Atlanta, Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, New York, and Miami to obtain grassroots feedback. In the spirit of President Clinton and Vice President Gore's challenge to "put people first," our meetings focused on putting the consumer first, and through customer service and information flow. The meetings were spirited, insightful, and productive, and featured many excellent ideas for improving customer service. While a variety of ideas were discussed, most of them addressed the following needs:

- To be more responsive to customer needs.
- To provide better information flow -- to make sure consumers receive better and more timely information about flight delays and cancellations, and also to create better feedback mechanisms for consumers to communicate their concerns to the industry and government.
- To listen to and empower front-line employees of the airlines, who are often the most knowledgeable about the needs of customers.
- To expand the capacity of airports and to continue to expand and modernize the air traffic control system.
- To enhance airline competition in order to provide the consumer with more choices, and spur the airlines to improve service and reduce fares.

Just last week, I completed trips to the seven major hub airports I mentioned earlier, to assess personally the factors that contribute most directly to delays in the field. These meetings took us out of Washington to meet with frontline employees around the country who have direct experience with the aviation industry's difficulties. We are seeing "best practices," airport-by-airport, that we can advocate broadly throughout the system--such as regular, joint meetings at certain airports among the airline tenants and the operator to expedite action, and innovative techniques individual airlines are introducing to directly assist travelers who need to rebook flights or find overnight accommodations.

Later today, I am meeting with members of the Air Transport Association Board of Directors to continue pursuing our efforts on many fronts, including those under our "Spring/Summer 2000" initiative to improve management of the air traffic control system.

In closing, we are pursuing numerous initiatives to address the problem of airline delays and cancellations, and our experience to date has been that our partners are equally committed to achieving real gains on several fronts. With the continued support of Congress, I am confident that we can find solutions and implement them to reduce the delays and cancellations that burden the industry and the air traveler.

Mr. Chairman, that completes my statement, and I would be pleased to respond to questions from you and the Committee.